

Poll shows public divided on Atiyeh

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As Gov. Vic Atiyeh leaves office, the public is evenly divided in its opinion of his performance during the past eight years, but the 44 percent who rate him "poor" or "not very good" marks a sharp decline from his standing five years ago.

In a telephone opinion poll of 804 randomly selected individuals taken for The Oregonian between Dec. 3 and Dec. 15 by Bardsley & Haslach Inc., 3 percent rated Atiyeh's job performance as "excellent," and 42 percent rated it as "good."

Twenty-eight percent said it was not very good, 16 percent said poor, and 11 percent were undecided. His standing was somewhat weaker among older voters.

"Whenever you get a rating that splits, dichotomizes like that, those aren't good ratings," said pollster J. Roy Bardsley. "This is a weak rating... certainly no better than mediocre."

The 44 percent negative rating is a sharp drop for Atiyeh from five years ago, before his 1982 re-election. A poll in December 1981 showed 52 percent "approved" and 10 percent "strongly approved" of the way Atiyeh was doing his job. On the other side, 17 percent disapproved and 9 percent strongly disapproved.

"The thing you've got to remember about Atiyeh," Gov.-elect Neil Goldschmidt said recently, "is that he was re-elected by the greatest margin of any governor in modern times."

"So in a sense you can't say anything about him; the voters have already said it all."

Atiyeh's performance

Thinking back over the past eight years, how would you rate Vic Atiyeh's job performance as governor?

Excellent	3%
Good	42%
Not very good	26%
Poor	16%
Undecided	11%

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Atiyeh commented, "I would have to think that's a fairly accurate representation of how Oregonians feel at this time."

He said the public might revise its opinion of him a year or two after he leaves office.

"In terms of what I know about Oregonians and the kind of job they wanted done, then I would think it would be better if they knew what I know... The polls would be a lot better."

"So... it depends on how much they learn," Atiyeh said, "and if they do learn a lot, the poll will improve."

The poll found Republicans rated Atiyeh more positively — 4 percent excellent and 49 percent good to 29 percent not very good and 9 percent poor. Among Democrats, 2 percent rated him excellent, 34 percent good, 33 percent not very good and 23 percent poor. The balance of each group was undecided.

Enthusiasm for Atiyeh, at 63 a 28-year veteran of state elective office, was sharply

lower among respondents 55 or older.

Of voters 54 or younger, 47 percent rated Atiyeh excellent or good, with 41 percent rating him not very good or poor, and 12 percent undecided.

Of voters 55 or older, only 40 percent rated him excellent or good, with a much higher 52 percent rating him not very good or poor, and 8 percent undecided.

Atiyeh's press aide, Denny Miles, said the governor's support for the 5 percent sales tax, overwhelmingly defeated by voters in September 1985, clearly lowered the public's opinion of the governor. But he said the governor had known that might happen when he endorsed the tax.

Atiyeh was also the target of explicit and implicit criticism from both sides of the 1986 governor's race, with fellow Republican Norma Paulus keeping a careful distance from the him and Democrat Goldschmidt campaigning stridently against the "same old Salem crowd," by which he often meant Atiyeh.

The poll showed men and women thought Atiyeh's performance excellent or good in about equal numbers. The totals for men and women were also close on the negative side, but more men than women found his performance poor and more women found it not very good.

The results did not vary much by education, income or profession.

The chance that the poll results vary from the true figures for all Oregonians by more than 3.5 percentage points, either plus or minus, is one in 20.



To his admirers, Atiyeh's has been the rock-steady hand on the helm of the ship of state.

"Perhaps in a period of severe retrenchment, perhaps the governor's attitude towards the fundamentals was one that stood all of us in good stead," said Hardy Myers, the Portland Democrat who was speaker of the Oregon House in the 1979 and 1981 sessions.

"Vic has been a good governor," said Gary Wilhelms, a Pacific Northwest Bell lobbyist who as a state representative was House Republican leader in 1979, the first Legislature of the Atiyeh governorship.

"Time will prove him to have been a better governor than certain people are giving him credit for now, but his low-key style has hurt him."

To his detractors, Atiyeh's has been the dead hand at the helm, merely maintaining the government and seldom finding new ways to meet the increasingly complex economic challenges facing the state.

"Vic will not be remembered as a vibrant leadership person," said Secretary of State Barbara Roberts, a Democrat. "That's not Vic's personality. He's quieter, less enthusiastic."

"I think no one would have been prepared to deal with the adversity of that economic time, but a little more innovative, dynamic kind of government might have moved some other people to action in a way that Vic could not."

When the recession hit, former Gov. Tom McCall's famous 1977 boast to outsiders — "Come visit . . . but for heaven's sake don't come here to live" — took on a haunting ring as the tides of new Oregon residents receded. Laid-off workers either left the state in droves or applied for unemployment and welfare.

Atiyeh prides himself on having kept the ship afloat, although he complains that his performance is being viewed unfairly.

"If I had McCall's eight years or the four years of (Bob) Straub or the four years out in front of Goldschmidt," Atiyeh said, "there's no question I would have been able to accomplish a lot more."

"I don't want to sound defensive about it, but what you get is criticism during the period when times are bad, and then when times become good, it's just the nature of things."

Tax controversies persist

In October 1978, Atiyeh was running for governor for the second time. He had beaten McCall in a three-way Republican primary, and he faced Straub in November, the Democrat who had defeated him in 1974.

On the ballot was a 1.5 percent property tax limitation called Measure 6, the first of many efforts to import California's Proposition 13.

Atiyeh endorsed the measure, as well as a competing tax cut drafted by the Legislature. If Measure 6 passed, he said, he would "clean it up" in the 1979 Legislature.

In November, Atiyeh won, and the tax cuts failed, but tax and budget issues would dog him through two terms.

In the arcane languages of tax policy and spending priorities, politicians encode their beliefs and desires.

Elected on a platform of tax reduction, over the years Atiyeh has proposed tax cuts — but he has also proposed shifts and increases. His tax moves would seem to reveal Atiyeh as a fiscal conservative, but one pragmatic enough to protect the basic structure of state government.

In retrospect, the state's financial difficulties were intensified by decisions made by Atiyeh and the 1979 Legislature.

Atiyeh presented the lawmakers that year with a plan to return about one-third of the projected \$600 million surplus to income tax relief and about two-thirds to property tax relief, said Richard A. Munn, director of the Department of Revenue.

The Legislature countered with a plan to give the bulk of tax relief to income-tax payers. A competition of sorts ensued over which tax relief plan was better.

The Legislature rejected Atiyeh's plan and voted its own \$705 million package into law. The governor later tried to put his version of the property tax limitation on the November 1980 ballot but failed to gather enough signatures on the initiative measure.

The huge tax relief plan included both a rebate and a permanent reduction in the state income tax rate, plus payment of up to 30 percent of property taxes for many taxpayers.

Meanwhile, the recession began. And parts of the plan continued into succeeding years, adding to the squeeze on the state as the recession caused revenues to drop still further.

"He worked hard on methods of giving that money back to the taxpayer," Munn said, "and then as soon as the session ends the (revenue) forecast drops \$150 million."

"I voted for it in 1979, but in retrospect it was an insane fiscal policy," said Sen. John Kitzhaber, D-Roseburg, now Senate president.

Atiyeh said not vetoing the tax relief package was the decision that haunted him most.

"I let this become law without signature. It was the only game in town in terms of any kind of tax relief," he said. "Probably what I should have done was veto the bill and call them back into special session."

"This is all hindsight, but I knew it was a mistake."

The steep tax cuts, followed by dramatic drops in tax revenues, led to a special session to cut the budget in 1980, the first of seven special sessions under Atiyeh. Most were convened to raise revenues and reduce state spending.

As a leader, a builder of consensus and a salesman for political ideas, Atiyeh is at his best in small groups.

Casual evaluations of Atiyeh's personal style — "couldn't sell ice to the Saudis" or "Caspar Milquetoast before large groups" — contain a kernel of truth but fail fully to capture the character of the man.

In person, Atiyeh is quiet but sincere, and he can be intense and forceful. Though he is not a fiery person, people who have traveled with him say he is quite effective in small meetings with foreign officials and business leaders.

Late in November, Atiyeh took the last of his "field trips," a series of journeys that have totaled a quarter-million miles around the state. He is proud of having visited every county fair, every city and nearly every community in the state.

This tour started with a morning appearance before several hundred members of the Oregon Credit Union League at a Jantzen Beach hotel, and he lived up to his reputation as a less-than-riveting public speaker.

Atiyeh told a well-worn, favorite story about an Oregon governor who charged a visiting colleague only \$2.50 for making a two-hour phone call to heaven from his office.

"Why so little?" asked the out-of-state governor.

The answer: "From Oregon it's a local call."

He also told an odd tale about a drunk who called Atiyeh from a jail in another state, asking to be extradited to Oregon. The point of the tale wasn't immediately clear.

And he welcomed the delegates to the conference, assuring them, "You can be a very constructive force. . . . You have great credibility in the legislative branch."

Atiyeh left the convention to polite applause, lighted a cigarette with an elegant gold lighter — he smokes two packs a day — and stepped into his gray Lincoln Town Car, leased for him by the state. Oregon State Police Lt. Lon Holbrook, his driver and bodyguard for nearly eight years, chauffeured him on the cross-town ride to a meeting of the Association of Oregon Counties, a group with which he appeared far more comfortable.

The delegates applauded him warmly, and Atiyeh was moved by a plaque that read "in grateful appreciation from your colleagues in county government."

But Atiyeh showed the greatest warmth in greeting a gathering of foster parents at a Children's Services Division office. He seemed to understand the importance of the recognition to the volunteers being honored, and his sincere tone made the gesture more than empty ceremony.

Atiyeh and his wife, Dolores, are former foster parents, he said.

"You never know how much you do," he said. A pregnant teen-ager who stayed briefly with the Atiyehs ran away, and they lost contact with her for many years.

"I never knew what became of her, until I saw her at a Scout troop meeting, as a troop leader, with her own kids," he said. Then he believed he and his wife might have made some contribution to her life, he said.

In his private life, Atiyeh is a golfer and a fly fisherman, and he collects guns and souvenirs of the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition. His taste in art favors Western subjects, and he once held an exhibition in his ceremonial office for Oregon wildlife painter Rod Fredericks. He has been a Boy Scout leader for more than 40 years.

His working office in the Capitol is adorned with souvenirs and ceremonial gifts from his 10 trips abroad and his thousands of miles around Oregon. Three carved eagles, their wings spread, stand atop a desk behind the governor. One holds a small, gilded pistol in its talons.

Friend of higher education

Among the major beneficiaries of Atiyeh's governorship is the State System of Higher Education. The department took its lumps during the retrenchment of the first term, sustaining midyear cuts of 6 percent in 1979-81 and 9 percent in '81-83.

But in the 1983 Legislature, as Atiyeh's economic development strategy evolved, the state's colleges got a specially targeted boost.

In the past, Oregon's colleges have specialized in teaching and research that supported the state's major industries: agriculture, forestry and fishing.

Under Atiyeh, the schools have strengthened or added departments dealing with cellular biology, computer science, electrical engineering and international trade. The new educational activities are intended to complement and support the industries Atiyeh has been working to attract.

The general-fund portion of the higher education budget increased 8.5 percent from 1979 to 1981 and jumped 21 percent in 1983 and 17 percent in 1985, ending up at \$516 million for the current biennium.

In addition, lottery funds have been committed to four construction projects totaling \$33.6 million, the first construction in more than six years on state campuses, according to Executive Vice Chancellor W.T. Lemman.

Atiyeh's record on primary and secondary education is more controversial. After endorsing a 1.5 percent property tax limitation in 1979, he campaigned against subsequent versions of the measure, and this fall he castigated both gubernatorial candidates for not speaking out forcefully enough against Measure 9.

When voter rejection of school levies forces closures, as happened recently in Estacada, Atiyeh did not intervene, said John Danielson, senior lobbyist of the Oregon Education Association.

"He should be telling Estacada, 'You're doing the whole state a disservice; your problems are no worse than other parts of the state,'" Danielson said.

"The governor ought to say, 'If we're going to put Oregon on the road again economically, you're going to have to solve your problem.' The governor has not done that."

From the point of view of the teachers' union, Atiyeh was "heavily oriented toward tax limitation on schools," Danielson said. "That's where we ran at cross purposes with him."

The increase in spending for higher education, he said, was achieved in part at the cost of primary and secondary education.

The state's spending for basic school support, the portion it pays for the cost of educating each pupil, was at 40 percent in 1979 but has slipped since to about 29 percent, which in turn affected the amount of local levies, Danielson said.

"He was indirectly raising property taxes to keep from having to raise other taxes or cut state payments," he said.

MONDAY: Atiyeh's relationship with the Legislature has been stormy, and he has garnered mixed reviews on environmental issues.